

About Population Pressure and Migration

by Anne Emerson

What is to be done about migrants? Can we make them stay where they don't want to stay? If people can't survive (comfortably) in the place where they were born, they leave. That is, they will leave if they have somewhere else to go, and/or if they have the means to get away. This commonsense idea has led to an understanding of migration that looks like this:



If a population grows too large, people will be “squeezed” out of their local environment. Or, if the big city offers more opportunities than the countryside, people will be drawn to the big city. Typically, the way this argument goes, both occur at once, so that an “army” of extra people from the country moves to the factories and makes new things that benefit everyone.

More by chance than by anything else, I (Anne Emerson) got to explore this idea in my doctoral research. In my opinion, the narrative in the paragraph above misses something vitally important, which is that the rules of the economic game have promoted an untenable degree of human disconnection in many parts of the world.

I have been trying to explain something I saw in my data more than thirty years ago, that has turned out to be more than a minor academic conundrum. In this world where so many people worry about jobs, that which I “saw” in the data years ago has become important for deciding where the world may go from here, in economic organization if not in general. The essay on “Income and Wealth,” also posted on this website, discusses the difference between stock variables and flow variables, and goes on to suggest exactly the above – if a region cannot sustain its population, people leave. Much of my other written work says that this narrative is mistaken. Therefore, I explain here in what way I think it is mistaken.

In the research, I performed a statistical investigation of all the “variables” (or factors, or possible explanations) that might encourage rural-urban migration. Rural-urban migration is known to occur in many countries of the world. The million-dollar question is “Why”? The statistical methods are able to distinguish one “effect” from another, and none of the usual suspects was guilty. In other words, “population pressure” was not a factor, nor were other explanations often suggested. Some readers may part company with me here. Intuitively, we “know” that population has something to do with migration. So, it helps to have looked at the data this way, that way, and the other way, and then to integrate what we see in the data with other things that we know.

I also investigated the role of “technological change” in labor migration. It may be hard to believe that this was a new thing to explore, only as recently as the 1980s. But it really was.

(Academics may be interested to see some of the references in my academic papers. The usual context for an investigation of rural-urban migration is “Development Economics.” I happened to reference the literature in “Labor Economics,” and some of my professors didn't understand that this was a very respectable literature, and that I was not “cherry-picking” the development

economics literature in support of ideas that were foreign to them. I was also interested in the literature on technological change, before that caught on in a big way.)

There was not a good measure for “rate of technological change.” This wasn’t something economists looked at, or knew how to calculate, at the time. Even so, I did my best to explore the role of technological change in the “push” migration out of rural regions. I already saw this as a global phenomenon – the country I studied was just one example among many. I chose the variable (or factor, or “cause”), “change in numbers of tractors in the self-managed sector” in the different administrative regions in Algeria. You might wonder what the “self-managed sector” was, and whether it represented all rural regions. You might wonder how numbers of tractors were counted, or whether numbers of tractors were counted in the same way from one year to the next.

BUT – Bingo! That VERY preliminary effort to explore the matter produced what is called “statistically significant” results. It was the ONLY factor, of all the ones explored, including population pressure alone, that was statistically significant with regard to the causes of out-migration from rural regions. (That is, what caused people to leave.)

That result suggested a whole “process” of how jobs and migrations interact along the path of economic growth and development. Professors were not convinced, and they relegated it to an appendix. That was the Appendix to Chapter Three, and screenshots of it may be found on this website. It is hard to summarize a book-length research project in two pages. If you are interested, you may read more on this website, or you may read my dissertation itself. It may be found on microfiche at Ann Arbor, Michigan. But I don’t advise that, for general readers.

Suffice to say that the idea of “technological unemployment,” which is well accepted as a phenomenon these days, was front and center in my understanding of what contributes to rural decline and city growth, when I was investigating the matter back in the 1980s and early 1990s. When a “modern-sector” farm buys a tractor, farm hands lose their jobs. In particular, young people don’t have a “slot” in the local hierarchy of jobs where they can fit. Older folks already worked with (new) tractors, and new jobs did not open up in the way that they once did, as old folks retired.

What this means is that the *belief system and structural organization* of the “farm hinterland and city” system is *primarily* what has driven people out of rural regions. And, moreover, if displaced farm hands do not have an education that will get them a job in the city, their plight may be quite desperate. The particular belief system that we might want to pinpoint here is the belief in technological progress. A related “belief” is that cheaper is better. (Advertisements tell us so.)

Yes, of course, it seems to be a good idea for a farmer to buy a tractor. It does more work, cheaper, than farm hands. Yes, of course, it seems to be a good idea for a husband to buy his wife a dishwasher because he doesn’t like washing dishes and has been persuaded that his wife doesn’t like it either. Yes, of course, all these types of things seem to be good ideas.

What many of us may not understand is that there are costs to this, that we prefer not to see. First, farm hands (or coal miners, or yesterday’s technicians) have lost their jobs and maybe can’t find others. Second, scientific research is messy and costly. Inventions cause accidents, pollution, addictions, and other ills that some of us call the “cost of progress” and others of us call “life-destroying” or “soul-destroying.” In sum – We need to start supporting other things besides runaway technological progress and “cheaper is better.” A conversation is appropriate!